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ABSTRACT

This document takes a look at the roots of aggression. Constant exposure to violence in the media along with the drug culture has played a pivotal role in the growth of violence among youth. The poor nurturing of the very young contributes to the problem, and early trauma can inhibit children's concentration, impede learning, hinder attachment, and blunt empathy. These changes predispose children to impulsive violent acts. A question and answer format was adopted for this document in order to provide a direct way to ask difficult questions. Topics addressed include: the reasons to study violence in very young children; the role of discipline in reducing or increasing violence tendencies; the role of pre-school play in preventing aggression and violence; and the role of the media in eliciting aggressive behavior. Key references are included after questions and at the end of the book to provide additional information. (Contains 23 references.) (JDM)

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BRAINWORKS: Birth to Kindergarten
The Aggression Component
Q & A

By
Kathy Lipelt, M.A. and Carlos A. Bonilla, Ph.D.

An IC A Publication
Child Development

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The Aggression Component

By
Kathy Lipelt, M.A.
Carlos A. Bonilla, PhD.
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Candace Righetti, Editor

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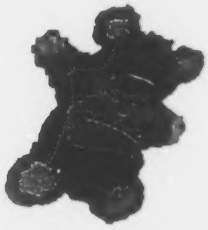

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DEFINITIONS

While there is a tendency to use the terms AGGRESSION and VIOLENCE interchangeably, they are not the same. For purposes of this workbook the definitions used are:

AGRESSION:

The starting of a quarrel, fight or war, especially without just cause.

VIOLENCE:

The use of bodily force to hurt or harm.

"Uncontrolled aggressive behavior leads to violence."

"SENSELESS" Violence:

Is a term used when violent behavior occurs in the absence of overt aggression.

"I am your child,

the first year lasts

forever."

Rob Reiner

Introduction
Seeds of violence

In recent years much attention has been paid to violence in schools. The list of incidents in which students injured or killed other students, teachers, administration personnel and themselves is long and continues to grow at an alarming rate.

The threat of school violence is real and, indeed, to avert such requires constant vigilance and preparation.

We must, however, take a close look at the early roots of aggression. It is much better to prevent it than to handle its tragic consequences. During the past 25 years, violent crime among juveniles has more than quadrupled, and weapons offenses for children 10-17 have doubled. What has gone awry?

Wide and constant exposure to violence in the media (film, video games, music) and drugs both play a pivotal role. At the bottom rung of the ladder, a common denominator is found: poor nurturing of babies and infants. Recent advances in pediatric neuroscience have clearly established this fact: Traumatic experiences can alter development of a child's brain chemistry and anatomy in ways that:

- Inhibit concentration.
- Inhibit learning.
- Hinder attachment, bonding.
- Blunt empathy.

In some cases, these changes predispose children to impulsive violent acts later in life. Extensive studies by child neuropsychiatrist Bruce Perry at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston indicate child abuse and neglect create serious brain abnormalities that can last through adulthood. In many cases, these children develop characteristics of the Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, or PTSS, observed in veterans of the Vietnam War.

Injury or abuse can be particularly damaging to children when it occurs before they are capable of using words and thought to try to understand what happened. Trauma, which is often related to abuse by parents or other caregivers, results in overpowering feelings of betrayal at a time when an infant's most important relationships

are based on dependency. Brain scans of abused/neglected children show abnormalities in those regions known to be extremely important in the control of impulsive/aggressive behavior, such as the prefrontal cortex.

It is unfortunate so many billions of dollars are spent on kids 10 and older but not close to half that on younger children. Resources utilized on kids under 3 would yield a 50-fold greater beneficial impact since their developing brains are much more susceptible to damage caused by poor nurturing, domestic violence, abuse and neglect. This also applies to the developing brain of a child during the fetal stages.

The seeds of violence can be sown in the first three years of life and be well-rooted by preschool.

In the new millennium, our goal should be to drastically increase our understanding of violence and emphasize preventive services for children and families.

Rob Reiner's quote – "I am your child, the first year lasts forever" – has never rung so true!

Carlos A. Bonilla

Why the Q & A Format?

Why the Q & A format? This format is simple, reader-friendly; Ask a question, find an answer.

By asking questions we learn and, it is our hope, you will also; None of the questions have simple answers and, those presented here, are some of the most difficult confronting our society today.

To help, we have included key references, when appropriate, after specific questions; at the back of the book readers will be able to access pertinent general references for additional, in-depth, research.

We hope you will learn a great deal while using our Q & A forum.

Candace S. Righetti, Editor
Oh Yeah Designs

Q Why is it necessary to study violence in very young children?

A The tendencies toward aggressive behavior and violence can manifest themselves at a very early age.

Robin Karr-Morse, a licensed family therapist and Meredith S. Wiley, an attorney, in their book "Ghosts from the Nursery: Tracing The Roots of Violence" described countless horror stories of young children who committed unimaginable violent acts. Some examples:

A 4-year-old climbs into a crib in a day care center run by his grandmother and stomps an 8-week-old infant to death.

A 10-year-old boy kills a 9-month-old baby by kicking and hitting her with shoes and a basketball until she stops crying.

Another 10-year-old kills an 84-year-old woman by beating her with her own cane and then slashing her with a kitchen knife.

In 1996, a 6-year-old became one of America's youngest criminals, charged with attempted murder after nearly beating his neighbor's newborn to death with a stick.

It is obvious: if 4, 6 and 10-year-olds are capable of such vile acts we must try to understand the reasons behind them.

The best way to reduce violence is to prevent it; but to do so, the biological, sociological and psychological causes of it must be studied.

According to Karr-Morse, poverty racism, television and the availability of guns all play a role in violence; most experts would agree.

But, to achieve prevention, the root causes of violence must be examined way before adolescence; those qualities that either protect or make us vulnerable to becoming violent begin to develop in the womb and during the first three years of life.

Effective prevention requires our awareness of an infant's early signs of aggression which may, later on, turn into overt violent behavior.

References

Robin Karr-Morse and Meredith S. Wiley: ***Ghosts from the Nursery: Tracing the Roots*** – Atlantic Monthly Press, 1997

Q Are some children born violent?

A We are all a product of our inherited characteristics, those genetic factors passed on to us by our parents.

When it comes to emotions, however, the environmental influences at an early age play an extremely important role in determining what our personalities will be.

The reason? Unlike all other parts of the body, the brain continues to develop at a fast pace right after birth and until adolescence; environmental influences can drastically change brain development-negatively or positively – particularly from birth to three years.

That is, genetics provides the foundation, environment gives it the final shape.

Imagine a building under construction. Hopefully the foundation is strong, safe and able to withstand lots of turmoil; then, the architect comes and works on it resulting in a pleasant, beautiful building or an annoying, ugly one.

So, Children with a shaky foundation, growing-up in toxic environments, surrounded by abuse, violence, crime and drugs are at a higher risk of developing into aggressive, emotionally unstable individuals, prone to impulsive behavior and violence.

Q What role does harsh discipline play in reducing or increasing later tendencies towards violence?

A Parents and child caregivers heed this advice: **SPARE THE ROD!**

Preschool kids who receive harsh physical punishment go on to display a propensity towards aggression as school children. This type of discipline by parents leads to their youngsters feeling:

- Frustrated
- Humiliated
- Unworthy of care
- Their needs are unmet

Results? To cope with difficult social situations, they go on to mimic their parents' model of violence.

Corollary: While it is true that children need to learn good judgment and to behave well, they should do so because of how good it feels to do the right thing, not because of fear of punishment. Punishment, as a form of discipline which results from parental anger, does not work because the lesson children derive from it is simply about effective ways to get attention by making their parents mad.

Reference

The Secret of Parenting: How to Be in Charge of Today's Kids – Anthony E. Wolf, Ph.D. – Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 2000.

Q Then, how do you explain the so-called "Natural born killers"?

A Some individuals do appear to be born with a high propensity to violence regardless of their early environment; fortunately, they constitute a very small percentage of our society. These are the ones who go on to become the sociopathic and serial killers. Sociopaths can rape, steal, murder without remorse; they show a deviant behavioral streak.

But, accumulating evidence in recent years, indicates sociopathic behavior can, in fact, be acquired as a result of

injury or trauma to a part of the brain located just above, and behind the eyes, known as the ventromedial prefrontal region.

Injury to that area of the brain can produce profound changes in personality, severe impairment in judgment and the ability to make sound decisions.

So, are killers born or made? Probably both!

Reference

Talaga, Tanya, ***Rethinking The Brain***, the Toronto Star, March 24, 2000.

Lloyd, LaDale ***Brain Scans Provide a Picture of Criminal Mind's Deficiencies***, The Tampa Tribune, July 26, 1999.

Violence

Violence originates from a constellation and interaction of risk factors including:

- Cultural
- Environmental (e.g: Severe child abuse)
    - Witness to
    - Victim of
- Serious mental illness
- Personality disorder
- Neurologic deficit
- Genetic
- Substance abuse
- External life stressors
- Availability of weapons

Understanding what makes certain individuals violent is a difficult and complex matter.

Q What are some common misconceptions parents have about disciplining young children?

A Misconceptions abound about the appropriateness of spanking as a regular form of discipline.

An extensive survey by the "Zero to Three" child advocacy organization showed 61% of parents of young children felt spanking as a regular form of punishment was okay.

These findings are troublesome considering that extensive research by child development experts indicates spanking on a regular basis can be very harmful and detrimental to young children.

In fact, 42% felt it was appropriate to spank children aged two or younger; this, despite the awareness by many parents about the connection between corporal punishment and children's tendency to become aggressive.

Here is another one: To help children develop a better sense of self control, spanking, as a regular form of punishment, works very well. WRONG!

Parents of children aged between birth and thirty-six months feel this is probably true (22%), definitely true (15%) or are not quite sure (4%).

But, child development experts from many disciplines, following extensive research, have shown this is not the case. The truth is:

"Spanking does not help children learn self control".

Reference

What Grown-ups Understand about Child Development, Zero to Three Organization, Washington, D.C. 2000 – www.zerotothree.org

Kutner, L. (1994). ***Can you Discipline a Toddler***? Parents, 102-105.

Straus, M.A., et. al. (1997). ***Spanking by Parents and Subsequent antisocial behavior of children*** Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine, 151, 761-767.

"California is in the middle of a childcare crisis, with a tragic shortage of quality care making our streets less safe and our neighborhoods more dangerous."

Lee Baca, Sheriff
Los Angeles County

Q What role does quality pre-school play in preventing aggression and violence?

A An extremely important role, evidence for which has accumulated for at least two decades.

A 15-year study of the Chicago child-parent centers, which provide services to low-income households, including pre-school and parent coaching, compared about 2000 kids at age 18, divided into two groups:

- One group (about 1000) received preschool and parent training.
- A second group (about 1000) attended all-day kindergarten but no parental coaching or preschool.

Results:

Even though both groups had very similar school experiences and family backgrounds, those without preschool were **60%** more likely to have one juvenile arrest and about twice as likely to have had two or more arrests.

Conclusion:

Preschool made a tremendous difference in the advent of criminal behavior of these poor, at-risk children.

In Michigan, a 22-year, on-going longitudinal study, has compared poor children who attend quality daycare and preschool programs with those who do not.

Results:
Poor children who went without quality daycare and preschool were five (5x) times more likely to become criminal offenders.

Data from many other studies in the U.S.A. and Canada have, essentially, replicated the longitudinal studies.

A recent report by "Fight Crime: Invest in Kids CALIFORNIA" emphasizes the importance of providing high quality childcare in the reduction of Juvenile delinquency.

So, with so much accumulated evidence, "what is the beef?" why aren't these programs being provided to parents on a universal basis?

Simple:

- The cost of quality infant care is out of reach for many families. In California it averages about $8,000 per year, which is 20 percent higher than the national average.
- Childcare workers receive very low pay, an average of about $8.38 per hour.

- Low pay makes it very difficult to attract and retain teachers who are well qualified.

Obviously, we must all advocate hard for policies which will make the funding of universal quality childcare a reality.

If we fail to do so, society will pay the high price of incarcerating larger and larger numbers of young criminals.

Reference

Reynolds, A.J., et al., ***Long-term Effects of Participation in the Title I Chicago Child-Parent Centers Symposium Presentations at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research on Adolescence***, Chicago IL. March 30, 2000

California's Child Care Crisis: A Crime Prevention Tragedy Fight Crime: Invest in Kids Report, March 2001

Schweinhart, L.J., Barnes, H.V., Weikart, D.P., ***Significant Benefits: The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study*** through age 27 (Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Press, 1993). More than 1/3 (35%) of control group, but only 1/14 (7%) of the preschool group, had been arrested more than four times by age 27. Among males, nearly half (49%) of the control group, but less than 1/8 of the preschooled group, had more than four arrests by age 27.

Q What constitutes abuse?

A In 1974, with the passage by the U.S. Congress of Public Law 95-247, the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), a national definition of maltreatment was established.

The major forms of maltreatment are: physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect (ie: failure to provide basic needs including affection and attention) and emotional abuse (ie: exposure to domestic violence, verbal and psychological abuse, etc.).

Reference

Protecting Children from Abuse and Neglect, Center for the Future of Children, The David and Lucille Packard Foundation, Los Altos, California, Spring 1998

Definitions of the Major Forms of Maltreatment

- ***Physical abuse:*** An act of commission by a caregiver that results or is likely to result in physical harm, including death of a child. Examples of physical abuse acts include kicking, biting, shaking, stabbing, or punching of a child. Spanking a child is usually considered a disciplinary action, although it can be classified as abusive if the child is bruised or injured

- ***Sexual abuse:*** An act of commission, including intrusion or penetration, molestation with genital contact, or other forms of sexual acts in which children are used to provide sexual gratification for the perpetrator. This type of abuse also includes acts such as sexual exploitation and child pornography.

- ***Neglect:*** An act of omission by a parent of caregiver that involves refusal or delay in providing health care: failure to provide basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter, affection, and attention; inadequate supervision; or abandonment. This failure to act holds true for both physical and emotional neglect.

- ***Emotional abuse:*** An act of commission or omission that includes rejecting, isolating, terrorizing, ignoring, or corrupting a child. Examples of emotional abuse are confinement; verbal abuse; withholding sleep, food, or shelter; exposing a child to domestic violence; allowing a child to engage in substance abuse or criminal activity; refusing to provide psychological care; and other inattention that results in harm or potential harm to a child. An important component of emotional or psychological abuse is that it must be sustained and repetitive.

Q How prevalent is the maltreatment of children, in all its forms, and what are its long-term consequences?

A A report, titled "Unhealed Wounds", published in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA, May 5, 1997) showed that of 1,931 female patients seen at primary care clinics in the Baltimore area, 22 percent had been abused as children. As a group, those who had been abused were more likely to suffer from:

- Depression
- Low self-esteem
- Anxiety
- Drug/use and abuse
- Suicidal tendencies

Than those who were not. These findings have been repeated in many studies carried out at urban clinics throughout the nation; conclusion: abuse and neglect in early childhood imparts serious health consequences on the victims.

Dr. William C. Holmes of the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine who reviewed 166 studies (from 1985 to 1997) concluded that up to 20% of boys had been sexually abused. Long term consequences? You be the judge:

- Over one third of juvenile delinquents
- Over 40 percent of sexual offenders
- About 76 percent of serial rapists

reported they were sexually abused as youngsters.

Reference

Sexual Assault of Young Children as Reported to Law Enforcement: ***Victim, Incident and Offender Characteristics*** (Report #, NCJ182990). Howard N. Snyder, Ph.D. National Center for Juvenile Justice U.S. Dept of Justice, July 2000

Clinical Characteristics of Women with a History of Childhood Abuse: Unhealed Wounds, J. McCauley, et al., Journal of The American Medical Association, May 7 1997; pages 1362-1368.

Q I've heard of pre-natal or fetal abuse; what is it?

A Abuse of a fetus can occur in many ways including the use of alcohol (leading to fetal alcohol syndrome), drugs (leading to heroin, crack and methamphetamine-mine-addicted babies).

Less obvious, but just as damaging, are the effects of stress and anxiety caused to the mother by domestic violence (psychological and physical battering). Hormones, such as cortisol, which are produced in large quantities in response to fear and stressful situations pass from the mother's blood into the fetus causing potential harm to its neurological development.

Fetal responses

Domestic abuse occurring during gestation can harm the fetus in untold ways. What can the fetus hear? We know the fetus hears and remembers songs, stories and music heard during gestation. We know the fetus will responds to them in the womb, and recognize them after birth. A fetus may react strongly to different kinds of music and show it by kicking and rolling. It can hear loud arguments, screams, threats, shattering glass and furniture being broken. Discord and strife also are recognized after birth.

The sound of an adult's rage is overwhelming to a newborn. When batterers pound on a table, storm around the house, slam doors or break glass, the infant's nervous system is also assaulted. "Shell shock" literally occurs. Physicians report injuries to the hands of infants who dig their nails into their palms during domestic disputes. These early images and experiences create an environment of anxiety that becomes a lasting impression of the world as a dangerous place.

A 1997 study found that newborns whose mothers suffered from chronic depression showed similar physical symptoms. Children born to women who were violently abused had slower reflexes, were less expressive and slept poorly. Their developing brains are acutely vulnerable to trauma.

No question about it: abuse of the unborn baby does occur and has a negative, harmful effect. It should be prevented under any, and all, circumstances.

A review of 3,000 studies on the effects of television watching on children, carried by the American Psychological Association, concluded: "absolutely no doubt that higher levels of viewing violence on television are correlated with increased aggressive behavior."

Carlos A. Bonilla, Ph.D.

Violent video games and other entertainment aimed at kids is partly to blame for an "ethic of violence".

Attorney General John Ashcroft
ABC's "***Good Morning America***"
March 23, 2001

Q What role does the media play in eliciting aggressive behavior in young children?

A There is no doubt: The media has a tremendous capacity to teach. Whether through television, computers, music lyrics or music videos, the messages conveyed are received by children whose behavior is shaped either subtly or directly by their influences. The research is voluminous and clear on the relationship between media violence and real-life aggression: a cause-and-effect relationship exists. After years of research a consensus among most researchers is: gratuitous violence does lead to aggressive behavior in young people!

Consider:

- Nielsen Media Research (1998) data indicate that the average American child spends more than 21 hours per week viewing television.

- The National Television Violence Study (Federman, 1996, 1997, 1997) points out:

    - Young people view 10,000 acts of violence a year,
    - 61% of shows contain violence of some kind.

- 26% of violent interactions involve the use of weapons
- 38% of violent acts being committed by "attractive perpetrators,"
- 50% of violent incidents show no apparent pain associated with the violence
- 75% of violent acts involve no evident remorse, criticism, or penalty for the violence.
- One of eight Hollywood films depicts a rape.

Three primary effects arise from viewing media violence:

- Learning of aggressive behaviors
- Attitudes desensitization to violence
- Fear of being victimized by violence.

Q Does real-life imitate video violence?

A Yes! Not always, of course, but in susceptible teens it can do so.

Example: In the Columbine high school massacre, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold used pistol-grip shotguns similar to the very popular ones found in video arcades. According to a Los

Angeles Times report "with each kill the teens cackled and shouted as though playing one of the morbid video games they loved."

As in the game POSTAL, they ended their murderous rampage by shooting themselves in the head: That, by the way, is the only way players can end the game.

A survey of 900 students in fourth-through-eight grade found nearly 50% said their favorite video game involved violence; Nonetheless, a direct correlation between most young murderers and the violent videos they watch has not-at least not yet-been found.

Unfortunately, when the games are played-in an almost obsessive manner, by children who have been abused, neglected or left to fend for themselves much of the time, their feelings of revenge, abandonment, powerlessness and resentment tend to blur the dividing line between fantasy and reality.

Results? In video-like fashion eliminate the adversaries, those who-in your appraisal-have done you wrong;

Example: In Paducah, Ky., Michael Carneal, the schoolboy mass murderer, calmly shot just nine times, hitting eight people, five of them in the head or neck. In video games, something we all should know, head shots are often rewarded with bonus points.

To children with pre-established sociopathic tendencies violent video games are just the ticket; as the Sony Corporation's advertisement for one of its video games says: "Get in touch with your gun-toting, testosterone-pumping, cold-blooded murdering side."

Yes, just the ticket!

Q What do you suggest parents do to reduce the media's effect on children?

A Although not all children who experience large volumes of violence through the media will develop aggressive behavior, enough do to consider it a risk to a child's health and happiness. The solution, as Stanford University researchers state, is rather straight forward: have children spend less time in front of the television and video games. Simply reducing exposure appeared to reduce aggression.

Parents must become interactive in their child's exposure to media. They should:

- Set limits on what and when children should watch.
- Limit television to 1-2 hours of quality programming per day.
- Keep televisions and video players out of children's bedrooms.
- Suggest alternatives such as social and family activities: walks, sports, reading, hobbies.
- Question children on the lyrics and context of music.

Parents should not worry that a decision to rid the numbered of hours of media exposure would make their child different. One of the greatest gifts parents can give their children is the courage to be different.

Homicide and suicide are the second and third leading causes of death among adolescents, and guns contribute significantly to both. What links adolescent homicides to American media is the glamorization of guns, which represent 26% of violent interactions on television. Several studies have looked at whether music preference is associated with adolescent turmoil and suicide tendencies. Arnett (1992) surveyed adolescents about their musical preferences and reckless behaviors. The

results demonstrated a clear association between heavy metal and hard rock as a musical preference and reckless behavior.

- 22% of MTV videos portray overt violence
- 20% of rap videos portrayed violence, carrying weapons constituted 19% of the violence, with children portrayed as carrying the weapon 15% of the time and adolescent 8%.

Adults who deal with children must monitor media use in a way that will foster the positive aspects of media to teach, yet protect, children and adolescents from having their value systems shaped in negative ways by media content.

Reference

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Domestic Violence and Children, Center for the Future of Children, The David and Lucille Packard Foundation, Los Altos, California. Winter 1999.

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